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Patterns in History: A Christian View (Book Review)

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Although the book bears a somewhat clumsy title and lacks what would considerably enhance its usefulness, namely, a complete index of subjects and topics, I nevertheless concur fully with the judgment of my colleague Dr. James De Jong who reviewed this book in the January 21, 1981, issue of *Renewal*. He says: "Reformed ministers, other serious students of Calvin, church and school libraries, and classes on the thought of Calvin will all need this important tool." Particularly so, I would add, in view of the frequency and carelessness with which the word "Reformed" is tossed about today. I suspect that many who claim to possess a measure of authoritative knowledge about the sources of the Reformed tradition have in fact never made it past Book I of the *Institutes*. Professor Battles himself knew of such people. He recognized "the Calvinist of

the first five chapters of the first book." As he says on page 23 of the introduction, "I can generally tell, when people speak of Calvin whether they know him only by hearsay, have read a few pages, or have sampled him anthologically. They have no clue to the wonderful interconnectedness of Calvin's thought. They ask questions which a fuller reading of the *Institutes* could have answered."

We do well to spend time with the history of the Reformed tradition—indeed, with the history of the Church of all ages. The *Analysis of the Institutes* will make it much easier for us to delve into the richness of Calvin's thought. By the same token, the existence of this book will make it considerably more difficult to excuse ignorance of the roots of our Reformed heritage.

Patterns in History: A Christian View by D. W. Bebbington. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979. 188 pages, \$7.25. Reviewed by Louis Van Dyke, Professor of History.

Bebbington argues that the historical process is usually visualized as a pattern such as a wheel or a line; hence the title of his book. He defines this process as what people write about the past (historiography), and what people have done and suffered, and he attempts to delineate both themes in his book. Bebbington's thesis is that man's thoughts about mankind are shaped by the same influences that have shaped historical thought (p. x.); and he aims to examine how man's understanding of the historical process has influenced how history was written. The book presents the traditions of thought about history from ancient China to the present day, although the author concentrates on how more recent developments in Western civilization affect the English-speaking world in the twentieth century.

In separate chapters, Bebbington traces the development of such patterns as the cyclical view, the linear view, the idea of progress, the historicist reaction to the idea of progress, and Marxism as a theory of history. According to Bebbington each of these views is involved in some way with the on-going (and everlasting) argument between the positivists and the idealists. In lucid prose, Bebbington takes each school of thought, examines its roots, gives an assessment of it, and reviews the historiography of that particular school.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the author's analysis of historians' notions of progress and of historicism. The idea of progress, arising from Eighteenth Century rationalism, argues that events move according to natural laws and that therefore history can be studied as a science. Historicism, coming out of the Romantic reaction to rationalism, claims that all cultures are shaped by history and that the customs and beliefs of any group result from that group's historical experience. Thus no generalization about the process of history can be made. The view of progress is epitomized in Comptian positivism, while historicism is epitomized in Kantian idealism. Bebbington asserts that

both of these approaches are secularized views of Christian belief and that the only way that they can be reconciled is for historians to return to the Christian overview from which they sprang. Thus the true historian is the Christian who through his Christianity provides the proper synthesis by writing from what Bebbington calls a "providential framework" of history. The Christian recognizes that God has control over all of human history (progress) and at the same time realizes that men are responsible for their actions (historicism).

Of the many quotable passages in *Patterns in History*, perhaps the following could serve as a warning for us all:

The consequences for a Christian outlook on history are serious. If a Christian historian tries to write without a thought for providence, he is likely to succumb to some alternative view or blend of views that happens to be in fashion. He will probably grow accustomed to the current assumptions of the academic world, positivist, historicist, Marxist or whatever. His Christian understanding of history will decay. It is far better to make no attempt to compartmentalize. Faith and history should be brought together, not separated out. (p. 186)

This is a well-written book which will serve as an excellent introduction to the study of history for the undergraduate. Furthermore, the author's contention that Christianity provides the synthesis of positivism and idealism serves as food for thought. One wishes that Bebbington had spent time elucidating his own views on this topic since it may hold the key to fruitful discussion on just what it is that Christian historians do. One drawback is that the book does not treat North American historiography and one will have to look elsewhere for adequate treatment of that subject.